A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

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Chapter 48

Acrid smoke drifted through the air, dimming the faint winter sun over the glassy wasteland of Mandalore. Freight speeders lay burning where they'd exploded, a week's worth of flour for half a million people had gone up in flames. The escort hadn't fared any better.

"They're all dead," Asajj Ventress said, to the holograms of her counterparts. "Not all during the ambush, mind you, look." She knelt down by a slain Wren clan warrior, his helmet removed and his throat slit. "Anyone who survived the initial attack was executed. I count twenty-two bodies, all ours. Whoever did this took their dead with them, if they even suffered casualties." *Which they might not have,* she thought, looking up at the ridge overlooking the road.

"I want to know who did this," said the hologram of Lady Bo-Katan Kyrze, her sharp face locked in a furious sneer.

The commander of the 501st detachment on the planet, Rex, was at the site of the attack with Asajj. He held up a hand: "Well, let's count. We've got the Death Watch who follow Gar Saxon. We've got the Death Watch who follow Rook Kast. We've got the reactionaries out on the western continent, who we buy food from. And finally for the Mandalorians, we've got half a dozen off-world clans circling like vultures. I'm not going to count out the Separatists of either Carammite faction–there's two, according to the rumors–or the Jabiimis, or the Tagge Mining Company, who only benefit from a stronger Republic occupation. So that's thirteen possible culprits, *minimum*."

"This civil war just gets worse and worse," Ahsoka Tano's hologram groaned.

"This is *not* a civil war," Kyrze said, fist in hand. "This is an insurgency."

"I don't see much of a difference," Rex muttered.

He's got a lot of mouth, for a clone, thought Asajj, with a smirk. She was starting to respect the man, even if he was just a slave of the Republic.

"Ventress, search the whole area for evidence. They have to have left *something* behind," Kyrze said.

"You can count one faction out, boss," said Asajj. She gestured to the bodies. "This convoy was escorted by Clan Wren warriors. Your people. Kast's Death Watch has been going after convoys escorted by clone troopers, not Mandalorians. Saxon's Death Watch will kill anyone."

Rex clapped his hands. "Alright, we're down to twelve culprits, now we're getting somewhere!"

"Not helpful, Rex," Tano said.

"Sorry, commander. I mean, uh, Ahsoka."

"This isn't the time for jokes," said Kryze. "Ventress, Rex, look for who did this, they can't have gotten far."

The joint operations between Kryze's government and the Republic's clone troopers could get contentious. The Mandalorians resented outsiders on their planet... but what exactly an outsider was varied from person to person. Some saw the clones as brothers, being identical to the late Jango Fett. Others claimed Jango Fett wasn't a Mandalorian at all, just an imitator, because he shared no blood with the 'real' Mandalorians. Kryze, a purist, was among that group. But her government relied on Republic support to stay in power, and there was no arguing the Republic was an outsider government. That was the brutal irony which kept a smile on Asajj's face.

They set off in a flight of gunships, circling around the destroyed convoy in greater and greater arcs. Ventress and Kryze's warriors were in one, the clones were in the rest.

The sandy desolation that was the Mandalorian wasteland glittered in the sunlight, a barren lifeless landscape that stretched for thousands of kilometers in every direction, across plains and mountains alike. It gleamed and shimmered on and on forever, countless kilometers of shining particles left by the decay of the glassy residue from orbital bombardment, only interrupted by the cubic water extraction outposts here and there, pumping uncontaminated water up from deep aquifers. Already the morning light was almost unbearably bright, shining off the glass and straight into Asajj's eyes.

"How do you people live here?" she asked, activating the polarization on her macrobinoculars as she searched the terrain.

"You get used to it," one Mandalorian said.

"I can't say I'm a nature-loving woman, but this is bleak, even for me," Asajj said.

"I think it's beautiful," another warrior said.

"I don't know, I wish I'd been assigned to Vorpa'eli," said a third.

The green one, Asajj remembered fondly. She liked going to the western continent of Vorpa'eli, she felt the Force much more strongly there. Kryze's reactionary sometimes-friends sometimes-enemies lived there, though, rejecting Kryze's authority as illegitimate. The deceased Duchess Satine had never been able to exert her authority in those lands either, she'd been just as illegitimate to them.

"What I wouldn't give to get out of this place. I hate Sundari. I joined Vizla just to get away from there!"

"Yeah, me too, and look where that got us!"

"Shooting our own people, taking orders from foreign scum-" The warrior stopped, looking at Asajj. "Present company excluded, of course. You're alright, Ventress."

"The red-haired harpy pays me to be here. I have no loyalty to her beyond that. Say whatever you want," she told them.

"Best not, I think," another warrior said.

Asajj smirked. "You're probably right. I only *think* I disabled the comms recorder in this gunship."

"Whatever, if Kryze wants to blast me, I might even welcome it. If you told me a year ago things would get *this* bad..."

"You want me to tell the Wrens you're a Death Watch mole?"

All the warriors laughed at that. Every other week someone got shot for treason. But it was never enough, there was always someone tipping off one of the dozen other factions on Mandalore. Kryze's government leaked information like how a washed-up smuggler's derelict leaked air. The grumbling and griping went on, as they flew around in circles pointlessly, looking for the attackers who'd vanished into the wasteland, and condemned Sundari to another round of rations reductions. *Just another day fighting the 'insurgency,'* thought Asajj.

"Captain, I don't know how long I can tolerate *that thing* on this ship," Lieutenant Oska Oto said to Esera, her feline face crinkling in disgust, ears laid back, fangs bared.

That thing, the Felinian Shau Meo, laid his ears flat right back at her, giving her a scowl. Esera could sense just how thin that defiant veneer was, though. He was a sweet and sensitive boy, being attacked unprovoked like this was upsetting for him. Shau had taken Buna's test better than Oto's disdain.

"Lieutenant Oto, I expected more professionalism out of you," said Esera. "You've managed to stay civil with Alize."

"I can accept that Alize had nothing to do with the Zygerrians who put me in chains. *That thing* is a living reminder of how my people have been abused by outsiders," Oto growled. "Is it any wonder Hutt slavers are taking them to be sold in the flesh markets? That's what they were made for!"

"Enough, Oto," Esera said. "He'll be on the bridge with Voyan and I, you don't have to be up there. If all you have to say to me is how much you dislike one of my crew, then you can go back to your duties right now."

"Very well, Captain," Oto said. She saluted, and stalked off.

This could be a problem, thought Esera. *But Oto's a professional, she can keep a lid on it. Right?*

"What was she talking about, Captain?" asked Ensign Meo, his angry facade crumbling away to reveal his true feelings, tears in his eyes. Felinian men weren't anything like Human men, Esera was noticing... Not that Esera had ever known many Human men, besides Master Callo and Miha Voyan, both of whom were very selective about what emotions they showed openly.

"It's complicated," Esera told him. "We'll explain it another time."

It took two days to get from Zoma to Raxus, and that was with *Encounter* ignoring the Hutt treaty. Esera didn't care about violating it. The Hutts didn't deserve respect. Ensign Meo took particular delight in listening to their impotent protests as the destroyer repeatedly violated Hutt space, a wonderful medicine for the uncertainty Oska Oto had put in him.

"One day we'll give them what they've got coming," he said.

"One day," said Esera. *One day soon, I think.*

They picked up supplies on Raxus, including a variety of working and environmentally-appropriate clothes for Ensign Meo and Purity... Esera also made sure *Encounter* received a few casks of Raxian wine, the same crookpine black Voyan had introduced her to back before Emberlene. The stuff had been bitter and biting, but it had started to grow on her. *It's good practice, getting used to it,* Esera told herself. *Who knows when I'll need to play my part on Raxus itself?*

From there, it was a mere hours-long dash straight to Agamar along major hyperlanes in Separatist control. Agamar had been the site of a brutal year-long siege, now concluded in a fruitless victory for the Agamarians and a strategic victory for Grievous some few months ago. The Felinian navigator had slept through the stop at Raxus, Agamar was the first planet he got a good look at.

"Wow," he said. "It's so... smudged."

"General Kalani instructed the Agamarians to poison and burn their lands as they retreated," OOM-451, the ship's droid commander, said. "The smoke, dust, and ash will hang in the air for months, or possibly years. A quarter of the Agamarian population perished over the course of the campaign, and massive casualties related to the famine, chemical weapons contamination, and impure air will continue for some time more."

"Why would they do that?" asked Meo, crestfallen at what he was hearing.

"To deny the enemy useful assets," the droid said.

"Or maybe just spite," said Esera. "If someone took something you made from you, wouldn't you be mad?"

"I guess so..." Meo frowned at the devastated planet below. "But what's the point of winning if you've destroyed what you were trying to protect?"

His question hung in the air, and Esera couldn't answer it. *The Mandalorians destroyed their own planet,* thought Esera. *Maybe we can ask them?*

The warriors of Clan Tenau came in an obscure Corellian vessel, old and patched-over, but bristling with weapons. The droids identified it as a heavily modified CR43. The gunship was much too big to fit in *Encounter*'s hangar, and linked up to *Encounter* by docking tube.

"Look sharp," Esera told Voyan, Oto, and Murshida, her three most-serious and combat-tested subordinates. *Mostly serious,* thought Esera, recalling the Shau Meo incident the other day. Voyan and Oto *were* looking sharp today, in their freshly-cleaned and pressed uniforms, sidearms on their hips, and Esera liked to think the same of herself. Murshida was as fearsome as ever, in gleaming silver armor and red robe, his eye-lenses glowing green beneath his cowl. Also present were the magnaguards, Grievous's secret eyes and ears. The airlock cycled, and in came the Mandalorians, helmets in hand, but fully armed and armored.

"Well met, Lady Komara," said Rahab of Tenau. She was much bigger in person. *Oh, come on!* thought Esera, looking up at the girl who was at least two heads taller than her... and much more feminine in a certain region, even with all that armor on. An eager grin lit up the big woman's face, and she brimmed with energy in the Force. "I am Rahab of Clan Tenau! This is my uncle, Baruch, and our clan historian, Kasi. And I've brought all my platoon commanders, too."

Esera had to do a double take on both the individuals she named. Rahab and the other warriors were all mostly the same: tall, bulky, skin and hair as bronze as their armor. Baruch, Rahab's uncle, was as light as Esera or Voyan, and blonde. Kasi wasn't even human, she was far too slim, far too pale, and her eyes were just shiny black orbs.

"We have come to fulfill our contract!" Rahab boomed, before she held up a datapad, and offered it to Esera. "But, um, we have to sign it first."

"Right..." said Esera. She signed her name to the contract, formally making the Tenau warriors mercenaries under her command, thus making their expedition legal under Ciutricene law. "This is Commander Miha Voyan, my first officer, Lieutenant Oska Oto, my hyperdrive engineer, and Mister Harak Murshida, combat specialist. You'll probably not meet anyone else today. But be aware, there is a Barabel on board. I trust Mandalorians know how to handle themselves around such beings?"

"I've never met a Barabel," said Rahab, clutching the datapad to her ample chest like a treasure. *Baby's first contract,* Esera thought, before giving her the rundown on Buna:

"Never apologize, never show cowardice, always stand your ground. Buna's a very typical Barabel like that, weakness triggers her hunting instincts. If she gives you trouble, give it right back. You might end up with a few broken bones but you won't die. And you'll get someone who's got your back out of it, too." With the safety speech done, Esera led them deeper into the ship, to one of the rarely-used conference rooms. She released Oto back to engineering duties, and took Murshida and Voyan in with her.

"Man, these ceilings are low!" Rahab said as she ducked through the doorway. "Who built this ship? Ugnaughts?"

"Gossams," said Esera. Keeping the smirk off her face was hard. *Take that, tall girl,* she thought. "Please, take a seat. I'll go over my plan for this operation." Rahab, Baruch, Kasi, and the platoon commanders sat around the table; Esera and her men were up front.

"Okay!" said Rahab. "What's it gonna be? Decapitation strike on the usurper's fortress? Deep raids on enemy infrastructure? Area denial operations? We're ready for anything!"

Baruch put his hand on his niece's arm. "Easy, Rahab. Let our employer speak."

"As great as the Mandalorian reputation is, I doubt a single company is going to hold a planet," said Esera. "Grievous has tasked me with securing the beskar iron mines. Clan Tenau would oversee production and export, and have first pick of the finished product. You would then distribute the remaining iron as you saw fit."

Right away, Baruch's eyes narrowed, and suspicion rose in him. But he said nothing. Rahab looked perplexed. "You're hiring us to give us our own planet's wealth?" she asked.

"It's not that simple," said Esera, remembering what Grievous had told her earlier in the day. "Grievous would *like* access to the beskar for himself. But, as warrior to warrior, he acknowledges the beskar is your birthright. What you do with it is your decision. We only ask you keep it out of the Republic's hands, or the hands of the Republic's allies."

"Like the Kryzes." Rahab nodded, and was about to speak, but then looked to her side. "What do you think, uncle? Would the Separatists be so magnanimous?"

"I doubt it," Baruch said. "Your grandfather said to never trust Raxians."

Before Esera could even get annoyed, she lost the chance to speak. "It's a good thing Lady Komara isn't a Raxian," Kasi, the Oscin historian said.

"Oh?" Baruch asked.

"I told your brother she wasn't Raxian. All he could see were the cultural trappings: the hair, the shadowed eyes, the clothes, the impractical ornaments. Komara is not a name found on Raxus, though. The only Human population there who use that set of syllables as a family name are a few thousand migrant workers from Stalimur." Kasi smiled, thinly. "And this ship is rather cold for a ship owned by a Raxian, don't you think?"

"Stali-*where*?" asked Rahab, giving Kasi a blank stare.

"I'm glad to see someone else does their homework," Voyan muttered.

"I always knew you were slacking off during my lessons," said Kasi. "But my point stands. Lady Komara is not a Raxian, she is Stalimurian. You can tell by the temperature of this ship and her dogged insistence on obsolete Human gender norms. They're a simple, straight-dealing people, if close-minded. I think we can trust what she says."

Esera narrowed her eyes. "Thanks." *What obsolete gender norms?* she wondered. *The skirt? Oh, of course, a bunch of meathead warriors* would *think that, wouldn't they?*

With a mechanical-sounding cough, Murshida entered the conversation. "Ladies and gentlemen, I must remind you, your enemy is the Republic and the Kryzes. Not each other."

"He's right," said Rahab. "Okay, Lady Komara, we're on the same page now. So, how do you want us to do this?"

You're up, Voyan, thought Esera, nudging his shoulder.

"Mandalore is a planet divided," Voyan began. "There are the New Mandalorians-"

"Faithless worms," spat Baruch.

"-in the domed cities and Old Mandalorians in the remote corners of the world. Not to mention, all you Old Mandalorians who were exiled, voluntarily or not," Voyan said. "You cannot control the mines without controlling the land. And that is where you come in."

"You want us to make an alliance with the faithful still on the planet?" asked Rahab.

"The Separatists use sound logic," Kasi told her. "Mandalore's surface was reduced to desert by centuries of civil war. The faithless hid in their domes and refused to heal the land. Our brothers and sisters who kept the faith took it upon themselves. They have been reclaiming the western continent of Vorpa'eli for three generations now. These people are natural allies to our cause."

"Alright then, leave it to us!" Rahab said. She jumped out of her chair, and hit her head on the ceiling. "Ow..."

"Please mind your heads," said Esera, as wryly as she could. "This ship wasn't built for taller beings."

"I recommend putting on your helmets," Murshida said to them. The Mandalorians did so, and there were no more incidents of the sort.

"They've agreed to the plan, Grievous," Komara's hologram said. "Though, they were skeptical."

"Of course they were!" said Grievous, laughing. "A gift from me is nothing to be taken lightly. Continue with your work, Komara." He shut down the transmission, and Clothar Aclinde stepped forward. The Carammite spymaster, usually harmless in appearance, had taken on a sinister look in the shadows of Grievous's tower-top lair.

"Phase one complete, General, just as I said. Mandalorians are nothing if not predictable."

"Just as you said," agreed Grievous.

"There's no way we're ever getting our hands on that beskar," said Aclinde. "They'll never part with it."

"I am under no illusions, spymaster. I only want to keep it from falling into the Republic's hands. If this goes as I want, we will have nothing to worry about from Mandalore again. See that it does so."

"I live to serve, General," Aclinde said, bowing.

Do you? Grievous silently asked. Komara and Aclinde's information didn't always line up. The Carammite's intelligence network was vast, for an exile, but he'd had decades to build up such a network, making contacts across the Galaxy. Even more contacts now that he had Confederate government money backing him. Komara's network didn't seem as expansive. In some areas, it exceeded Aclinde's, in others, it was vague or even wrong. How had a girl her age put together such a thing so quickly? Grievous had used his magnaguards aboard *Encounter* to access the communications relay computer. He found spying on his secret right-hand woman distasteful, but he had to know...

The Galaxy turned out to be a small place. The bulk of Komara's intelligence came from the actual Carammite government, including messages from Ado Eemon himself. What a bizarre thing it was, to have a planetary dictator and his exiled rival both spying on Grievous's behalf, even if one used a middle woman. But Komara didn't rely exclusively on Eemon, she had a surprising number of messages coming and going from locations in Hutt Space. Far better contacts than what Aclinde provided, many of his had gone silent when the Hutts started making their move.

The next day, Grievous was in his weekly strategy meeting with his top admirals, seated in a circle around a map of the Galaxy as they often were. The Hutt question weighed heavily on all minds.

"Thanks to the General's efforts at gathering intelligence," began Admiral Mar Tuuk, eliciting an eye-roll from the silent hologram of Esera Komara, "we are certain the Hutt mobilization will take another eight to ten weeks. They *may* strike sooner. Keeping all the pirates, mercenaries, and feudal levies they've called to their banner quiet is an expensive undertaking. But they are succeeding, given we have yet to locate their staging grounds."

"The Hutts are secretive," said Rear Admiral Kronaak, resident Hutt Space expert and crab-man. "Their philosophy is that deception is the most important element of a battle. Misdirection, obfuscation, disinformation, they excel in all of it. It's how they run their criminal empires. It's how they'll try to fight us."

"But you are confident we can crush them," said Grievous.

"Of course. Pirates and mercenaries fight for money. The Loyalists believe in something more. They are enemies I can respect, because we too believe in something more. The Hutt's warriors? They believe in nothing. And that will be their downfall."

Grievous found himself nodding in agreement, but Pors Tonith shook his head.

"You underestimate the power of financial security, my friend," said the Muun. "The money the Hutts pay their underlings puts food on their tables and weapons in their hands. Without that, they'll have nothing."

"What is life worth without belief?" Grievous asked, staring at the hologram map. The admirals looked at each other for a moment, questioning, confused. "Is anyone foolish enough to lose his life for something as petty as money? So that his masters will have a good time in their towers and palaces while he dies forgotten in a distant land? What did he believe in? Was his life sold so cheaply?"

Ricimer Eemon, son of Ado Eemon, was the one brave enough to speak first. "People have so many reasons to fight, General. Not all places are as noble as Kalee."

"We will crush the Hutts and their lackeys," said Grievous. "Kronaak is right. You all believe in something more, something bigger than your own life. Your faith in the righteousness of this cause and your will to triumph has brought you this far, against all odds. If the Republic cannot crush you, the Hutts will break upon you like water against rock."

Helnurath, the Stenax warlord, crossed his huge arms and flexed his leather wings. "I believe in fighting," he said. "If the Hutts want a fight, I'll give them one."

"I think I speak for everyone when I say I'm proud you think so highly of us," Rame Cartroll said. "But this does lead into an issue we can't ignore, General. One we *have* been ignoring."

"Oh?" Grievous turned to Cartroll, eyes narrowed.

"The Republic is producing millions of officers each year to lead their fleets and armies. They cycle in and out of active combat, and some go behind the lines to teach the next class what they've learned. They have a unified doctrine and ideology. Our officers come from Corporate trade fleets, regional militaries, or pirate outfits who are now too associated with us to abandon our cause. We have no single doctrine, no single ideology. And most critically, we recruit piecemeal, on each ship captain's discretion. Oftentimes ships have to recruit whoever they can get, trained or not." At those words, Komara fidgeted, no doubt thinking of that Felinian boy who'd just turned up on her ship. "The General's new *Oceana*s are impressive ships. But who's going to command them? We're stretched to the breaking point already."

"We will never have a unified ideology," said Khwaramenes, the Givin navigator. "The Confederacy of Independent Systems is composed of independent systems in confederation, with a common goal of throwing off the Republic's yoke and little more. We are those who could no longer tolerate the status quo. That is *all* that binds us."

"Then at least let us establish a common doctrine!" Cartroll said, fist clenched. "I lost an entire wing of my fleet at Tellanroaeg because one of my commanders lost communications and tried to play hero instead of holding his position like the rest."

Helnurath laughed. "*Doctrine?* What are we, clones? We don't need doctrine! We have spirit! We have the will to triumph! Just as the General said."

"Be that as it may, Admiral Cartroll's concerns about recruitment are valid," said boy Eemon. "We need more men. And women. And those that don't count as either. A ship like *Oceana* is worthless if the crew cannot function."

"And how do we solve this issue?" Grievous asked his admirals.

"The time for a good plan was three years ago," Kronaak said. "Now we need *any* plan. I believe Captain Komara's flash-training is our only possible option now."

Curse you, Sidious, curse you, Dooku! thought Grievous. It was so obvious now, that the Separatists had been meant to lose this war. They'd never even set up training programs to replace the fallen commanders. Of course the Confederacy had been supposed to fall. It wasn't designed to last more than a handful of years. The only reason it hadn't fallen yet was Operation Striking Star's success.

"It's not *my* flash-training," Komara muttered under her breath, too quiet for any ears but Grievous's to pick up on.

Pors Tonith scratched his chin. "Would the young captain care to explain further on how flash-training works?"

The young captain shot the Muun a deathly glare, then took a deep breath before speaking. "It's very simple. You... record, I guess, the actions a person takes in a situation. You imprint these actions in that situation onto the subject's mind. When the subject finds themselves in a situation close to that one, they'll be able to draw on the experience of the recorded person. Like, if a clone trooper suddenly needs to use a piece of complicated equipment, like a tank he's never operated before, his flash-training will kick in, and without thinking about it too hard he'll be able to use that equipment. Not as well as if he'd actually been taught to drive said tank. But he'll *know* enough to get it working. He'll know where every button and readout is, what each lever and switch does. I was told it's like muscle memory. If you don't think about it, your body knows what to do, your eyes know where to look. But if you do think about it, it's really easy to get confused."

"This sounds dangerous," says Mar Tuuk, frowning at Komara. "Easy to manipulate, easy for things to go wrong."

"Do you have a better idea, Admiral?" asked Cartroll. He turned to Grievous. "General, Kronaak is right about this too. We're out of time for a good solution. This is at least *a* solution."

Grievous leaned over the projection of the Galaxy, staring into the blue and red lights. "Vice Admiral Cartroll, take whatever steps are necessary to put this plan into action. I want crews for my ships."

The arrival of a Separatist destroyer in the Mandalore system raised alarm all throughout Sundari. Evacuation sirens wailed, crowds fled to the bomb shelters, daily life slammed to a halt, and in half an hour Sundari was as silent as the grave.

"Spooky," Asajj said, looking out over the still cityscape from the command room of the palace.

"All evacuations are complete, Lady Kryze," said the civilian prime minister, a dumpy and dour man named Vantai.

"Very good," Kryze said. "Prime Minister, join the rest of your government in the shelters. If there's fighting, leave it to us."

"Of course the Seps turn up now," grumbled Commander Rex. His eyes were fixed on the scanner readout. "But why haven't they attacked yet? And what's that other ship with them?"

"Does it matter?" Bo-Katan Kryze asked.

"I'd say it does," said her second-in-command, Ursa Wren. Wren looked over Rex's shoulder, giving it a cold glare. "Those are Clan Tenau sigils on that ship."

"Tenau!" Kryze growled. "What are those dogs doing here?"

"The Tenaus were part of House Kast, before they were exiled," Wren said. "They could be here to give Rook Kast's Death Watch faction support."

Ahsoka Tano frowned, and joined Rex and the Mandalorian woman at the scanner scope. "The Separatists have supported Death Watch before- Hey, wait a second, run this ship's markings through the computer, Rex."

"Uh, sure thing, boss."

The computer hummed, and Kryze raised an eyebrow. "Do you recognize this ship?" she asked.

"Oh great. It's *that* ship." Tano brought it up on hologram. "This is *Encounter*, a *Recusant*-class destroyer that rammed General Kenobi's cruiser during the Battles of Zeltros, a few months ago."

"Wait, this is *that* ship?" Asajj's memories of everything in the aftermath of Zeltros were fuzzy, but she definitely remembered being thrown around in a bacta tank and a massive bloom of death in the Force.

"Looks like Esera Komara just turned up for the party," said Tano.

"This will be the third time we've run into her..." The Force worked in mysterious ways, Dooku had always told Asajj. But *why* did it keep bringing that failed Jedi back into things? Asajj scowled. Foolish little girls didn't belong in places like Mandalore.

"Who is Komara and why should I care about her?" asked Kryze. "I just see another outsider come to interfere with Mandalorian affairs."

The Togruta took on a thoughtful expression. "Esera Komara is-" she started to say, but Asajj wasn't feeling that charitable.

"Imagine Ahsoka Tano, but she's a Human who's as flat as a board, much worse with a lightsaber, and somehow even more moralistic," said Asajj.

"Worse with a lightsaber? She almost killed me!" said Tano.

"Only with the dark side. The moment she let go you cut her hand off. And I dropped her in five seconds on Zeltros." Asajj put her hands on her hips. "We've got nothing to fear from Komara, trust me. We've got nothing to fear from that Zeltron sidekick she's supposedly got now, too. No, the real problem will be the Skakoan." *The Skakoan who could have killed me if he wanted, but didn't... The Skakoan who made me draw on the dark side again. No, I'll have none of that this time!*

"Why are we assuming she's going to attack?" asked Tano. "It's been half an hour and she's done nothing!"

"Since when were you part of the Komara defense force?" Asajj snapped.

"Since she saved your life, Ventress."

"She *what?*"

"It was her droids who stabilized you back on Zeltros, when I asked her for help-"

"Shut up, both of you," said Kryze. "I don't care who this Komara is. I don't care about her Zeltron or her Skakoan. All I care about is if she's a threat or not. And if Ventress says she isn't, she isn't."

"The droids will be target practice, at least," Wren added.

While the Mandalorians planned for battle, an uncomfortable Rex drafted to help them integrate the Republic's much more substantial forces into a potential operation, Asajj pursued information. She grabbed Tano by the arm in the hallway outside.

"You never said anything about Komara helping me on Zeltros!"

"I forgot about it," said Tano. "Things got so dicey up in orbit it slipped my mind until... now, really."

"I can't believe I owe my life to that chestless stump."

"Why are you so fixated on *that?*" Tano squinted, suspicious.

"Because it's an easy way to insult her," said Asajj.

"Uh, okay. But I didn't know you hated her this much."

"Annoyed. I'm annoyed by her. She made such a big deal out of being betrayed by your precious Jedi Council. As if people don't get stabbed in the back every day!" Asajj sighed. "Komara is a little girl who thinks the universe revolves around her and her ideals. I'd love to beat that out of her."

"Right..." That suspicious look on Tano's face still wasn't gone. "So basically, she's me."

"She's you, with even more of a victim complex. I don't like victims. I could act just like her, with everything I've been through, but I don't. You know why, Tano? Because I'm not a victim."

"Well, that's one way to look at it." Tano shrugged. "I see things another way."

"Fascinating, tell me more." The sarcasm dripping from Asajj's voice managed to break through even Ahsoka Tano's obtuse brain, because she didn't say more. "Look, we have a job to do. We keep your ex-Death Watch friend's government from toppling, we get paid. If that means going up against Komara's merry band of misfits, so be it."

"It's amazing how you can hold such a grudge against someone who you heard speak for three minutes, like eight months ago," said Tano.

"I'm an expert on grudges, kid."

"Yeah, I've figured that out by now." Tano began to fiddle with her communicator.

"What are you doing?"

"Seeing if I can call Esera. I want to know what she's doing here."

Asajj rolled her eyes. She wasn't even going to dignify that with a response. But the Togruta didn't have a chance: the holonet provider for Mandalore wouldn't connect to the Separatist network. "Sometimes I really hate ComFast," Tano muttered. "What was Satine thinking, signing a contract with these guys?"

"You get what you pay for," said Asajj.

"That's just it, I looked at the records, Mandalore's supposed to get unlimited connections at a hundred petabytes a second. Now it's refusing to talk to whatever shadowfeed Esera's ship is on and I'm getting a data rate of forty *mega*bytes a second. This is ridiculous!"

"Then Satine must have been an idiot, everyone knows ComFast is even worse than the Hypercommunications Cartel and Tagge Hololink, combined!"

Tano gave her a confused look. "Are you a businesswoman now, Ventress?"

"I've learned a thing or two out in the Galaxy."

The morning's intelligence briefing was going as usual: the Republic was consolidating its forces in the Mid Rim for a new offensive, the Separatist rebels were strengthening their bastions and searching for new targets to raid now that they could no longer strike convoys with impunity, the Hutt clans were calling their warriors and mercenaries to a secret gathering place... but Director Orlok had a surprise.

"That Komara girl has turned up again, at Mandalore," Orlok said. "Republic forces on the planet have yet to report contact, but she's there, with exiled Mandalorians."

Ardabur Aspar leaned in at the table, his masked face tilting. "My dear friend has emerged from the shadows once more!" he said. "What could she be up to this time?"

"Why is this relevant?" Tarkin asked. "Our occupation of Mandalore has produced nothing but expenses and casualties." Neither particularly bothered him, of course, but he did like to get more than that out of occupying a planet.

"If we can restore order to the planet, we can take more out of the beskar iron mines," said Orlok, stroking his bushy mustache. "A few hundred tons of beskar would let us equip an entire division of special forces, clones or otherwise, with blaster-proof armor. Combine that with our new Knights, and you'd have a very potent formation."

"Then Komara must be after the beskar too," said Aspar. "Chancellor, with your permission, I would like to go to Mandalore and stop this plot-"

"No," Tarkin said. *You're the only Knight who knows about Maul, I need you here,* he thought, trusting Aspar's psychic Jedi powers to pick up on his intentions. The way the young man settled back in his seat told Tarkin he'd gotten the message. "You know the rest of the Knights better than I do, General Aspar. Choose one who can take down Komara. Let us be rid of this pest before she grows any more vexing."

"That shouldn't be hard," Aspar said. "The two times I've dueled her, I only lost because she had outside help."

"That sounds more like she just used her advantages better than you did. Young women have a much easier time getting help than men, for whatever reason," said Orlok, eyes twinkling. The mask hid Aspar's face, but Tarkin could tell he was giving the Intelligence Director a glare. Tarkin couldn't help but smirk.

"Then I'll send a woman to get rid of a woman," said Aspar. He tapped away at the console where he sat. "Potkin, get up here, I have a job for you."

Minutes later, Potkin arrived. Shadday Potkin was a Human who could have been thirty, but where Jedi were concerned, thirty could easily be secretly sixty. Even ones who weren't Yoda seemed to live longer. She was dark-haired and tanned, with a serious expression on her face. Like all the Knights of the Republic, she'd given up most of the Jedi robes for a plain Army uniform, the roundel of the Republic replacing the rank badge, lightsaber hanging from the belt. The Knights made a point to openly show their weapons. The one thing they did keep was the outer hooded cloak, now in deep grey instead of the usual brown. Tarkin suspected this was done to match looks with Aspar, who always went about cloaked and hooded, impractical and showy as it was.

"Supreme Chancellor, General Aspar, Director," Potkin said, bowing as she entered the room. "What do you require of me?"

"Do you remember Esera Komara?" asked Aspar.

"How could I not, General? You have never stopped complaining about her," said Potkin, straight-faced. Aspar bristled, his gloved fist clenched until the leather creaked.

"It must be 'Rag on Aspar' day," Orlok said, chuckling.

Tarkin wasn't in the mood for it. "Enough with this foolishness. Get to the point."

"Komara's turned up at Mandalore. I want you to go there. Ostensibly, you're to aid our occupation forces in controlling the planet. In reality, you're there to kill Komara," said Aspar.

"There's a link between Komara and Grievous," Orlok added. "Getting rid of her will hurt Grievous, and the rebel cause."

"Do not hesitate, show no mercy," Aspar told Potkin. "Give the traitor her due."

"You don't even need to tell me, General," said Potkin, her lips twitching upwards. "From what you've told me, I have the feeling I'll be so disgusted by her that I won't even think of sparing her life."

I quite like this *kind of Jedi,* Tarkin thought. *So much more relatable than those dusty old mystics in that temple.*

Whirlwind descended down to Mandalore, alongside the Tenau's Gunrunner. Below them stretched the lands of Vorpa'eli, where green things had returned and the glassy white wastes were in retreat. Esera was at the helm of *Whirlwind,* as the ship didn't like being flown by non-Force sensitives. With her came her usual magnaguard escort, plus Murshida, plus Purity Alpha, and plus Sanya.

This is so awkward, thought Sanya. Purity Alpha had been the one to come to her.

"Please accompany the Captain and I down to the surface," the biodroid girl had said.

"She couldn't ask me herself?" Sanya had asked.

"The punishment the Captain has decreed upon you continues unabated, Miss Sanya. She does not wish to speak or meet with you. I serve as her emissary." Purity had given her what the crew was quickly coming to call the 'Purity stare.' The biodroid girl had transformed in the three weeks she'd been on *Encounter* with Esera while the others were on Zoma's surface. She acted like Esera's personal guardian now.

Does this count as a meeting? Sanya wondered. Esera had yet to acknowledge she was even on the ship. *Don't punish me more, Purity!* And that was a real possibility: Purity had asked to borrow Zule's lightsaber. She received a "Yeah, sure," for an answer. *Biodroids with lightsabers, what a world...*

The ship touched down, and Sanya was glad to get out of the red-tinged lighting of the interior. Mandalore's air was dry, and carried the scent of dust. But plants were growing here, little shrubs that spread along the ground, delicate leaves reaching for the sky. Wisely, Esera had put *Whirlwind* down on what appeared to be a road, while the Gunrunner landed just behind them. Neither ship wanted to disturb the plants. Nearby were rows and rows of what looked like greenhouses, just a few kilometers distant. Speederbikes were already rushing towards them on the horizon.

"This should be interesting," Rahab, wearing full armor, said to Esera, who was in her naval captain's uniform, ankle-length skirt and all. The big Mandalorian woman's chest was about even with Esera's eyes, making them look like a very peculiar mother and child. *Esera's definitely adopted in that relationship, just like that Baruch,* thought Sanya, with a little smirk. Purity and Murshida stood behind Esera. After the stop on Raxus, Purity now had her own wardrobe. She was dressed in a uniform much like Esera's, without rank markings, and in sensible trousers instead. No doubt her jacket concealed hidden weapons. Like the Zeltron's lightsaber.

"I wonder what they'll think of you," said Esera.

"What do you mean?"

It was Baruch, Rahab's uncle who clearly shared no blood with her, who answered: "These are the faithful who stayed on the homeworld. Those whose ancestors lived in these same lands. I probably share a biological great-great-grandfather with someone out here. They're a conservative people, Rahab. They're slow to change, and slow to accept differences."

Rahab tilted her head. "But we're all Mandalorians," she said.

"We are," said Baruch, with a frown. "And I *hope* we all remember that."

How old is this girl? wondered Sanya. Rahab was failing to read between the lines.

Two Mandalorians on speederbikes drew to a halt in front of the group. Armored and helmeted, of course.

"Who goes there?" one called.

"I am Rahab of Clan Tenau! I seek an audience with the leader of these lands!" Rahab yelled back, her voice as powerful as the rest of her looked.

"Who?" asked the Mandalorian stranger.

Rahab bristled. "Rahab, of Clan Tenau! Clan Tenau of House Kast! Come on, have we really been forgotten here?"

The two Mandalorians looked at each other. "And who are your friends?" one asked.

"This is Captain Komara, of the Separatist Alliance-"

"Confederacy of Independent Systems," Esera interrupted, arms crossed.

"-and her, uh, people." Rahab gestured vaguely at the band of misfits assembled by the Captain.

"Great, outsiders," the Mandalorian grumbled.

It was half an hour by speederbike to the nearest village. Luckily, starships were much faster, and arrived at the village in a matter of minutes. *Well, it's a village alright,* thought Sanya. The houses were made of mud brick, and roofed in thatch, the roads were unpaved. "It's, um, rustic," Sanya said to Murshida.

"There is calmness in simplicity, young one," Murshida said. "This is a place where the people have returned to their roots in the land."

"I don't see any signs of sewers..." Sanya said. "I like simplicity as much as the next girl, but I like sanitation too."

The group was ushered into the biggest building, no doubt some kind of analogue to Lord Lakau's hall back on Zoma. Mandalore wasn't nearly as hot and wet, which was a nice change of pace. Quite quickly, Sanya was noticing that the Mandalorians of Mandalore were all of the same blood. Each and everyone of them was tall, light-skinned, and blonde. Not as tall as the Tenaus. But it was clear, both groups were unrelated to each other. Baruch was the only one who looked like he fit in.

Presiding over the hall was an old Mandalorian, his hair and beard grey. The Tenaus all nodded respectfully to the elder. Rahab spoke, far more respectfully than Sanya had heard yet: "Sir, I am Rahab, representing Clan Tenau of House Kast. This is my uncle, Baruch, and Kasi, our clan historian. I bring with me Captain Esera Komara of the Confederacy, and her own warriors."

"I'm an agricultural specialist, actually," Sanya couldn't help but add. Many of the Mandalorians gave her a glance, but no one spoke before their leader did.

"I am Kentaroh, and I speak for the people of Dusala," said the old man. "You are not of Mandalore, Rahab of Tenau. None of you are, but for this Baruch."

This clearly wasn't what Rahab had expected to hear, but exactly what Baruch tried to warn her about. Rahab stared, blinking. "Well, no, we were all born on other planets... No Tenau has stepped foot on Mandalore for generations."

"It is evident," said Kentaroh, turning to Baruch. "Why have these off-worlders come, dressed in our armor?"

Baruch's face took a dark expression, and Sanya could feel the anger in him. The other Tenaus had been left speechless. "Us off-worlders have come to overthrow the usurper. But as I feared, it may have been best for us to never have come at all," he said. "There are no true Mandalorians left in this wretched place."

The people of Dusala stirred, muttering, and Kentaroh narrowed his eyes. "We are the true Mandalorians. You are one of us. Yet you follow these foreigners who imitate their ways."

"Sir, we *are* Mandalorians!" Rahab said, an edge of desperation in her voice. "We wear the armor! We raise our children as warriors! We teach them to follow the way-"

"It takes more than belief to be a Mandalorian," said Kentaroh. "You do not have the blood."

"Blood? *Blood?*" sputtered Rahab. "Sir, what does blood have to do with anything?"

"Blood has to do with everything," Kentaroh said.

"No, it doesn't!" said, Rahab, incredulous. "The bonds of family can be made by anyone, blood relation is meaningless! That's part of what being Mandalorian is! Baruch isn't related to me by blood, but he's been watching over me my whole life! Does that mean nothing because- because- because our genes don't match up? That's ridiculous!"

The mood of the hall was rapidly turning hostile as the cultural gulf between the Mandalorian exiles and Mandalorians who stayed on the planet opened wide. Esera watched, vaguely curious about what was going on. *Are you going to do something?* Sanya wondered, looking at the hands slowly moving towards blasters. And something Esera did.

"Elder Kentaroh, Rahab Tenau, might I remind you that you two have a common enemy?" asked Esera.

"You think you can speak here?" asked Kentaroh, frowning at her. "You don't even pretend to be one of us, girl."

"I speak on behalf of General Grievous directly," Esera said. "Whatever you say to me, you say to him."

The Dusala Mandalorians went silent and still. Even here, in this little village, they knew Grievous. Kentaroh opened a hand. "Speak."

"While Tenaus and Dusalas argue about who's the real Mandalorian, Bo-Katan Kryze sits in Sundari, with your terraforming project in her sights. Some carpet bombing with incendiaries would ruin everything you've built here. The usurper will tolerate no challenge to her rule. And you've challenged her, haven't you, Elder Kentaroh?"

Kentaroh nodded once. "We have no love for the Kryzes. They put us under blockade. Bo-Katan has attacked us as often as she buys our produce."

Tangled webs, thought Sanya. 'Blockade' had caught her attention though. What had the Kryze family blockaded? Not food, these people were more than self-sufficient. *They sure perked up when I said I was an agricultural specialist...* did the Dusalas need off-world supplies? There was a stark lack of machinery bigger than speederbikes in this village.

It was Purity, of all people, who stepped forward. "I noted to the Captain as we flew in that your people were using hand tools," said the biodroid. "Your speeder bikes are ancient, your dwellings decrepit, your people weakened by disease. These are the results of the enemy's blockade on your lands."

"Your warrior is sharp-eyed and keen of wit, Captain Komara," said Kentaroh, studying Purity intently. "Dusala suffers. What do you want from us?"

"I have come here with Clan Tenau's warriors to deny the Republic your beskar mines. General Grievous would appreciate it if you sent some of the output his way. But the Confederacy would rather the beskar belong to the Mandalorians in its entirety than see a single gram of it go to the Republic or its pawns," said Esera. "We cannot do this without Mandalorian support. From off-world *and* on-world."

"And what do you offer us?"

Esera opened her mouth, but stopped. With what must have taken great effort, she made eye contact with Sanya, and waved her forward. "This is Sanya, our agricultural specialist, as she called herself. She has helped restore planets before. It is her calling. As I understand it."

So, she has been paying attention to what I do, thought Sanya. "The Captain is right, sir," she said, mindful of how Rahab had referred to him.

"Sanya, is it?" Kentaroh leaned forward in his chair, his cloudy eyes locked on hers. "What can you do for our planet?"

"Well, it won't be the first orbital bombardment I've helped clean up," said Sanya. "Take me out there for a look and I can give you the rundown, share techniques, suggest equipment."

"And how would you bring in this equipment through the Kryze blockade, Captain Komara?" asked Kentaroh.

"I'm not without contacts, sir," Esera said.

Disaster averted, thought Esera, stepping out of the village hall. *Now where has Rahab gotten off to?* The big girl had stormed out of the hall, her spirit whirling with emotion. Mandalorians weren't Esera's subject of expertise. Her Jedi education in history had touched on them: as enemies of the Jedi. Mandalorians could be very dangerous, especially the older ones. Only the best Mandalorians survived into middle and old age. She'd been particularly wary of Kentaroh for that reason, but Baruch too. Reaching forty was an accomplishment for a Mandalorian warrior who sought out battle, and Baruch was definitely in his forties.

"Where have our Mandos gone?" asked Murshida, looking around the village.

"Somewhere over here," said Esera. The Tenaus had gone back to their ship, with only Rahab Kasi, and Baruch staying behind. Rahab was sitting with her back against the building, visibly upset. "Purity, Murshida, wait here, I'll handle this."

"It's unbelievable," Rahab was saying. "How could they say those things? Have they really fallen so far from the way?"

"I told you, Rahab, things are slow to change here," Baruch said to her, leaning against the wall.

"Most clans who were exiled were down to their last survivors," Kasi said. "They took anyone who committed to living as a Mandalorian. Better to pass down the ideals than to let them die. My predecessor told me it's best not to divide the clan by speaking of blood... I think you're old enough to know where your lineage came from, though. Your genetic ancestors were from Trammis III. A colony ship of theirs crashed on a remote planet, and a few dozen children were all who survived. The Tenaus, or what was left of them, took those children in, and the clan has been dominated by your stock ever since. But we are all Mandalorians of Tenau. We follow the way, we live by the faith. Nothing these people say can take that from us."

"I know, I know," said Rahab, wiping her eyes. "It's just... frustrating. It really is. After everything our people went through, we're greeted with... that!" She sniffled, and looked up at Baruch. "We're really from Trammis III? The planet with the big lizard monsters? That's pretty cool."

"The very same," said Baruch.

Esera couldn't help but smile. As tall and strong and... *developed* as Rahab was, she was still young at heart. *Younger than me?* she wanted to ask.

The clan's alien historian rolled her head. Probably because she had no discernible pupils to let the young woman know she was rolling her eyes. "It doesn't matter where you come from, Rahab, it matters how you live."

"Yeah, that's what I said to Kentaroh, right? Didn't seem to convince him."

"I don't think we'll get any warmer welcome than that," said Baruch. "These people have clung to this planet for generations. They're not inclined towards change."

"This is the easy part," Esera said to them. They did not react to her sudden speech; warriors of their training had known she was there the moment she came around the corner. "These are the lands that were neglected by the Kryzes. Or worse, actively sabotaged. Once we get them on board with our mission, we'll need to start convincing the rest of the planet."

"The faithless," Rahab said, glowering. "Who would give up the Mandalorian way? Why would anyone want to regress to worrying about who's related to who, and lying, and stealing, and-"

"Everyone lies, even you Mandalorians," said Esera. "You'll just have to ask the New Mandalorians why they reject your way of life. Come on, we have other local leaders to find. The Dusalas aren't the only group on this continent."

"I don't lie..." grumbled Rahab.

A week passed, and nowhere was the reception to the Tenaus warmer than with Kentaroh's people. But bringing Sanya down to Mandalore had been a good idea. All the Mandalorians of the green continent suddenly found outsiders much more palatable when the outsiders could help them restore their lands. Sanya took careful note of all their issues and problems. Her list, relayed through Purity, was growing ever larger.

So much equipment, thought Esera, looking over it. *I should ask Voyan if- oh right, he's up on the ship. Do I want to disturb him? No, not right now.* There were millions of credits worth of items on Sanya's list. Luckily, Esera had millions of credits to burn, most of it in hard cash, courtesy of one deceased Nautolan drug lord.

Seven days for seven chieftains, and Esera had made tentative deals with the men and women of power on this continent. The lack of interference from Bo-Katan was strange. *What are they up to?* Esera found herself thinking often. More importantly, the time had come to talk to Buna's contact. In the privacy of *Whirlwind,* dressed for the occasion, Esera sent a connection request, but it went straight to recording:

"Greetings, Same Sellero," she said, remembering *Same* rhymed with *Padme*, "Princess of Penhalla. I am Lady Esera Komara of Raxus, serving as representative and diplomat on behalf of General Grievous. I have a long list of heavy machinery and specialized equipment I need delivered to a potentially active war zone. Our mutual acquaintance, Captain Buna, has referred me to you as an expert purveyor of items of interest-"

The light on the hologram device switched from recording red to live green, and the blue visage of a woman appeared in *Whirlwind*'s cabin in front of Esera.

"You should have started with Buna if you wanted me to answer, lady! *Purveyor of items of interest?* Is that really what that old lizard calls me?" said Same Sellero. It took Esera's brain a moment to register the alleged princess she was seeing. Esera had expected a woman of elegance and class. Instead, what she saw was someone ridiculous. Her peaked military-style cap was suspiciously tall, her durasteel-capped, knee-high boots had soles centimeters thick and her impractical heels lifted them even higher. She wore a big overcoat with a collar that reached her ears. Her long dark hair spilled out from under the cap and went just about everywhere. The girl's expression was overbearingly smug. *This is a princess?* Esera wondered, realizing she'd once again worn the wrong outfit to a first meeting. Her Raxian dress, fit for an audience with the Grand Prince, was a very far cry from what this alleged princess wore.

"You're not a princess," said Esera, crossing her arms. "I should have known. Buna would never rub shoulders with actual royalty."

"Watch it, missy!" Sellero said, making a threatening gesture. "I am *real* royalty! My father was the king of Naboo!"

Esera squinted. *Well, that explains the name... and she's got that Naboo look to her face.* From what little Esera knew of Naboo, Same Sellero's father had to have reigned at least forty years ago, Sellero wasn't a noble house she'd read about while there. But Naboo was an elective monarchy, so by what right did Same Sellero claim to be royalty? *Whatever,* thought Esera, shaking her head. "I'm not going to ask how you ended up at Penhalla, then. Look, princess, I've got a job and I can pay it in hard, unmarked cash. Are you in or are you out?"

"Now you're speaking my language, lady!" Sellero wrung her hands together. "Send me that list, and I'll send you the invoice. We'll be there when you need us!"

"Do I have a guarantee that you won't take my money and run?" Esera asked.

"Yeah, she's named Buna. That big scaly beast put her reputation on the line by sending you to me. You think I'm gonna disrespect Buna by dashing on you? Hell no! I'm not stupid!"

"Great," said Esera. "I'm transmitting the manifest now. Five percent finder's fee, five percent more for safe delivery."

Sellero nodded, looked at something on her end of the transmission. "Wow, lady, are you starting the galaxy's biggest farm or something?"

"Terraforming, actually," said Esera. "Can you get me these things?"

Sellero gave her a sidelong look. "Do I need to do it legally?"

"If it hurts the Hutts, the Republic, or TaggeCo, no."

The pirate princess flashed her a big smile, and gave her a two-finger salute. "Give me a few days, lady, I'll get these to Mandalore, or I'm Buna breakfast!"

I can actually believe that, thought Esera.

Not moments later, the comms opened up. "Captain, we've got a problem," said the voice of Voyan.

Esera sighed. "What now?"

"There's a star destroyer that just jumped into the system. One of the new ones."

"*Imperator?*"

"No, *Tector,* by the looks of it."

The name brought vague memories to the forefront of her mind. Intelligence briefings had spoken of this ship, but had it been Republic or Confederate intelligence briefings? She couldn't remember. "What are they doing?" she asked.

"Our spy satellites are relaying their telemetry to us, so we've managed to stay on the other side of the planet from them. *Encounter* is a quick ship, we can keep them off our backs for a while. They're making no moves, though. It's odd." Voyan sounded concerned.

"They don't want to burn unnecessary fuel," said Esera. She remembered *that* was from a Confederate intelligence briefing. Tarkin's escort ship program had delivered results for the Republic's convoys, but fuel shortages were still a thorn in the side of the Republic fleets. "Just keep a close eye on them, Commander. Don't start a fight we can't win."

"Understood, Captain."

The newest arrival at the court of Bo-Katan Kryze was someone whose presence filled Asajj with irritation. Knight of the Republic Shadday Potkin had come, dispatched from Coruscant several days ago, and had assumed direct control over the clones of the 501st Legion. That was her legal right, and Rex was none too happy about it.

"She reminds me of General Skywalker, in the worst way possible," he said to Tano.

"What do you mean?" Tano asked.

"He means the arrogance," Asajj said. "Your master was *arrogant*. This Potkin woman is *arrogant.* She makes Dooku look humble."

Rex hung his head and sighed. "I shouldn't be talking about my commanding officer behind her back. But I have a bad feeling about this woman. Hell, I've got a bad feeling about all of these 'Knights' who follow Tarkin. This feels completely different than how things were last year."

"Yeah, you're telling me?" Tano gave him a wry look.

"Keep your head down, clone, and you won't get smacked. A little lesson I learned back on Rattatak," said Asajj.

"Thanks, Ventress, you're a real inspiration to us all." Rex glared coldly at her.

He's not bad, for a clone, thought Asajj, smirking. Rex was to clones what clones were to battle droids. At least clones could theoretically make jokes. Rex actually could, and did. It was refreshing.

Something was afoot in Vorpa'eli. That Komara girl was going from clan to clan with her own Mandalorian warriors, putting together some kind of alliance, as far as Kryze's spies could tell. At Kryze's war council, there was some disagreement on how to deal with the Separatist incursion.

"Give me one good reason not to blast them all into atoms," Bo-Katan Kryze said.

"I recommend it," General Shadday Potkin said, giving the offending continent on the holotable a frown.

"I don't," said Ursa Wren, the number two woman in the Kryze regime. "Without the produce from that continent, we'll be forced to import almost all our food from off-world, and far richer planets than ours have already bought up the contracts with local Loyalist agri-worlds. We can thank the Agamarians for that. If we burn that continent we'll have to start buying from the Separatists."

"That would be unwise," Potkin said.

"And where exactly would this planet get food from if it can't buy from the Separatists, can't buy from the Loyalists, and can't grow its own?" asked Ahsoka Tano, glowering at Tarkin's lackey.

"I don't recall asking your opinion, exile," said Potkin. She gave the Togruta girl a sneer. "But for the record, Mandalore could easily make a deal with the Hutts."

"Have you thought about just killing Komara?" Asajj suggested to the council. Mandalorian and outsider alike turned to look at her. "Why bomb a continent to ashes when you can just take out the troublemaker?"

"As expected of an assassin," Ursa Wren said. "Lady Bo-Katan, we should do what Ventress says."

"Hold on, hold on!" Tano raised her hands. "We don't need to kill anyone here."

"It'd be *really* easy-" began Asajj, but Tano spoke over her.

"Why don't I go and talk to Komara? I'll find out what she's after here. Whatever she's offering them, I'm sure we can offer those people better. The Separatists are stretched thin as it is, right?"

Ursa Wren took on a contemplative expression, and leaned over to whisper in Kryze's ear. Kryze then nodded. "I don't want Mandalore relying on outsiders any more than it already is. Ahsoka, find this Komara girl, discover what she's promised them. We'll get the Republic to match it, and then some. I want those stubborn peasants on our side."

"This won't work," muttered Potkin. "And who says the Senate will agree to any of this?"

"Who says I work for the Senate?" asked Tano, already on her way out of the room. "Ventress, I'm gonna borrow your ship!"

"You're paying for the fuel!" Asajj called after her.

"She's really got all this gear coming?" Sanya asked Purity, who held the datapad out for her to read.

"Our pirate contact wisely fears Buna. The Mandalorians will have what they asked. We will have succeeded in buying their cooperation," Purity stated matter-of-factually. Too matter-of-factually, for Sanya's comfort.

"The cat's not in the bag yet," Sanya muttered.

"I do not understand."

"It's a saying, Purity. Nothing's over until it's over."

"I understand now."

Never a normal moment with Purity Alpha, thought Sanya, eyeing the biodroid with weariness. Suddenly, Purity looked up at the sky, as if she could hear something no one else could. "Captain Komara!" she yelled.

"What?" answered Esera, who was busy inspecting Mandalorian architectural practices so that she didn't have to stand near Sanya as her creepy robot girl spoke for her.

"*Encounter* has detected a fast-moving object headed directly for this location. Its flight path indicates it's coming from Sundari," said Purity.

"And we know this... how?" Esera asked.

Purity tilted her head, eyes fixed on the sky, listening to information only she could pick up. "It's broadcasting a Zeltros IFF signal."

"Zeltros? Here? Wait-" The circuits were alight in Esera's mind, and the Force surrounded her. A look of realization came over her face. "Ah, I see. Have her land here."

Purity nodded, and minutes later, a curious ship touched down outside the village of the Dusala Mandalorians, where they had returned to for the upcoming meeting of clan heads. It looked like a shoe wearing a saucer, with engine pods on either side. *What is that thing?* Sanya wondered. *Some kind of gunship?*

Out from it stepped a girl- no, a woman now, a woman who Sanya had never expected to ever see again. An orange-hued Togruta, taller and more shapely than the lanky preteen Sanya had last glimpsed six or seven years ago. There were two lightsabers on her belt, and she carried herself with less bravado and more wariness than she had back in the Temple days. Murshida and Purity, plus the two magnaguards, had formed up behind Esera, hands on weapons. Sanya was left to stand awkwardly to the side, until the Mandalorians all came out to see the newcomer. Rahab and her people stood on one side of Esera's group, Kentaroh and his stood on the other, Sanya finding herself next to the elderly chieftain himself.

"I didn't expect this much of a welcoming party," said Ahsoka Tano.

"I didn't expect to find you here at all," Esera said. Both women were alert, Sanya could tell, but neither had hostile intent to the other. But there was no mistaking the faint aura of displeasure coming from Esera. *She got her hand cut off by that woman,* Sanya thought, *and Esera seems have developed a skill at holding grudges.*

"I'm not here to fight, Esera, I thought my IFF would give that away."

"It's the reason your welcoming party isn't looking at you from behind the barrels of blasters."

"Yeah... Look, you and I share a lot of values. Neither of us wants to start killing people if we don't have to, right?" Tano asked.

"Naturally."

"I'm here on the authority of Lady Bo-Katan Kryze, in good faith," said Tano. "She wants to know what's going on out here and I want to avoid this insurrection getting any worse."

Esera opened her mouth, but Kentaroh stepped in. "The usurper sends an outsider, after all these years?" he asked. "What could we possibly want from her?"

"That's what I'm here to find out," Tano said. "I'm really not interested in a fight. Neither is Bo-Katan. And I don't think any of you are, either."

"Perhaps not." Esera's voice was guarded and level. Her left hand hovered near her lightsaber hilt. "My mission is to evict TaggeCo from this planet, Tano. I cannot let the Republic take beskar iron ore for itself. Whether that ore goes to my side or stays with the Mandalorians entirely, that's up to them."

"And how are you going to make this happen?" Tano asked. "I see a dusty village and a few dozen warriors. You've probably got thousands across the continent. Bo-Katan's get tens of thousands, and the 501st. Resorting to force of arms is hardly your style, Komara. So what exactly is your plan?"

"I would be a fool to tell you," said Esera.

The Togruta girl rolled her eyes. "I'm not with the Republic. I'm on Bo-Katan's side, not the Senate's."

"Last time we were on the same planet, you tried to arrest my engineer for being a Separatist."

Voyan's never mentioned that*!* thought Sanya, raising her eyebrows. Tano's skin was too orange for any blush to show, but she did look abashed.

"Old habits die hard. I'm sorry about that."

Esera stared at her, expression impassive, but in the Force, she was full of surprise, even Sanya could feel that. An apology from Ahsoka Tano was not what she'd expected. That aura of displeasure lessened. "All I'm here to do is stop the Republic from getting at the beskar ore. If you want to help keep those rocks in Mandalorian hands, I'll work with you. Maybe we can do some good here."

Kentaroh cleared his throat. "And where do we fit in to all this, Komara?"

"Whatever happens, you and your kin are on my side," she told him. "We've made our deal. You will help me get the Republic off this planet, one way or another."

The old Mandalorian stroked his beard. "Very well," he said. "You two should come inside. We must speak to the clan chiefs."

This is going incredibly well... almost too well, Sanya thought, not daring to speak it out loud.

"Unacceptable!" Potkin snapped, reading Tano's report. She threw the datapad onto the holotable, making the map flicker. "This is absolutely unacceptable! The Republic keeps the peace on Mandalore, the Republic keeps this planet from falling into chaos! And this is how your little exile would repay us? By forcing our mining operation out and hoarding that iron for yourselves?"

Bo-Katan's glare was icy. "This is *my* planet, Jedi. *I* make the rules here, not you, not your Senate, not your Chancellor. If I want Ahsoka to investigate an opportunity to bring my people together, then I will have her do so. You get no say in this."

"So be it, Mandalorian," said the Jedi. She turned on her heel and swept out of the room.

"She needed to be taken down a peg," Asajj said. "Nice work, Kryze."

"I've got my moments." Kryze let a little smirk show for a moment, but hardened up quickly. "Wren, what do your spies report?"

Ursa Wren stepped forward, cool and calm. "The clans of Vorpa'eli are shakily behind the Separatist, for whatever cause she's come to preach. Their elders are confident the Separatists will deliver what they've promised but none are eager to start a fight that'll see their lands burned again."

"And what are the Separatists delivering?"

"Agricultural and terraforming equipment, as far as we can tell," said Wren.

"Not weapons?" Bo-Katan tilted her head. "So much for the Old Mandalorian ways."

"The western clans are a peculiar lot," Wren agreed. "But this is a great chance to bring more warriors to our side. With the westerners under our banner, the Death Watch–both Death Watches–will be crushed. We could end this insurrection in a month."

"Dream on," Asajj muttered.

"No, this could be just what we need," Kryze said, staring to pace around the table. "My sister's authority never reached Vorpa'eli. They called her a usurper, a false Mandalorian, and since she was a pacifist there was nothing she could do when they refused her rule. Foolish woman."

"I heard her own police tried to kill her, just to hide a smuggling ring," said Wren.

Kryze grimaced. "I question Satine's judgment every day. But if I can bring all of Vorpa'eli into the fold, Death Watch will be crushed. They've got tens of thousands of warriors. We wouldn't even need clones anymore. No clones, and Kast's Death Watch won't have reason to attack us. We might even get them to come in out of the dark. This could be the start of something, Ursa. Something big."

"It very well could be," said Wren. If she wouldn't put a damper on Kryze's spirits, Asajj would.

"You're forgetting something. What about your city people? These so-called New Mandalorians?"

"What about them?"

"I don't know about you, but I actually go out into Sundari. No one out there is happy with what the western clans are doing. They won't react well to an alliance with them."

"So what? They're pacifists. What are they going to do, write stern letters?" Kryze laughed, and even Wren smiled for once.

"If it wasn't for these people, you'd be camping out in the desert," said Asajj. "Maybe they are a bunch of wimps, but they're wimps who keep this whole system running. Just things to consider, boss."

"One thing at a time, assassin." Kryze put her hands on her hips, and she looked at the western continent. "There's an opportunity here we can't afford to miss. We can get the Republic off this world and when that's through, we'll kick the Separatists out, too. A new Mandalore, a united Mandalore, for the first time in..."

"A long time," Wren finished for her.

"Hey, no one ever got anywhere by sitting on their butts doing nothing," said Asajj. "If you're gonna go for the big prize, I respect that. But I don't think it'll be as simple as you make it out to be."

Kryze zoomed out on the holotable map, until she could see the whole of Mandalore. "One planet, one people, one ruler," she murmured.

Asajj wondered what the citizens of Sundari would have to say about that, when they learned of her plans.

Standing beside Ahsoka Tano was the last thing Esera thought she'd be doing on Mandalore. *We keep meeting,* she thought, *but why? This is our third encounter within a year's time. First she cuts off my hand, then she gets out of my way, and now she's actively trying to help me? What's going on?* The two former Jedi women had little to do at the moment, except watch Bo-Katan Kryze's hologram address the seven chieftains of Vorpa'eli. This was the first Esera had ever seen of her. She was a hawkish-looking woman, sharp and fierce, her face all angles like so many Mandalorians were.

"I have no interest in your activities in Vorpa'eli," Kryze told them. "Whatever the Separatists have given you, you may keep and use as you see fit, in your own lands. Maybe the dream of a green Mandalore will spread. It's not my place to say. What I need are troops, troops to replace the clones."

Kentaroh and the other chieftains glanced at Esera, and she gave them a nod. "That can be arranged," Kentaroh said. "But we will need assurances. Faithless attacks on our lands must cease, first and foremost."

"My intelligence operatives are stretched thin, sir," said Kryze. "If I had your warriors, I would be more able to effectively control the unruly elements under my rule..."

The back-and-forth went on and on. Mandalorians were shrewd negotiators, that was for sure. But it was seven against one, and Esera had no doubt the clans of Vpora'eli would walk away with a good deal.

"It's just one planet," Tano said quietly, "but if we can bring peace to it, we'll have done something right."

"That's... exactly what I was thinking," said Esera.

"Ventress seems to have quite the grudge against you, you know."

Esera tried not to sputter too loudly. "*She* choked *me!* And kidnapped my engineer! What did I ever do to her?"

"Apparently you're as self-righteous as I am, but with more of a victim complex. And..." Tano's eyes were laughing, even if she kept the rest of her face under control. "Well, she had a few unflattering comments about your figure."

It was hard, suppressing the growl in her throat. She clenched a fist until her knuckles went white. "Everyone's always got something to say about me, don't they?"

"I'm quickly learning that's the way of the Galaxy outside of the Temple and Grand Army," Tano said. "You get used to it. Lots of people speak without thinking. We live in a society where-"

Whatever the Togruta was going to say next, Esera didn't know, because all the Mandalorians had turned to them. The clan elders looked amused, and Bo-Katan Kryze's eyebrow was raised. "Do you two girls have something to add to our conversation?"

Esera's face began to burn, and she was envious of Tano's orange skin for a moment.

"Sorry," muttered Tano.

"We had questions for Lady Komara anyway," said one of the chieftains. Esera stepped forward, and cleared her throat. It was Kryze who spoke, though:

"I want to hear Grievous's offer, straight from your mouth, girl."

"What you speak to me, you speak to Grievous, woman," said Esera, a variety of threats crossing her mind.

Kryze sneered, and Esera could see why she was so disliked by these clans. *What a vile creature,* she thought. The woman looked at her like Esera was something dirty on her floor.

"Lady Komara," Kentaroh said, "tell her what you told us."

"I am here to expel the Republic from this planet. No more beskar iron ore may be taken by them. It belongs with the Mandalorian people, and they decide what to do with it. General Grievous would appreciate access to this resource, but it is by no means demanded of you. All we want is to prevent it from getting into Loyalist hands. In return for their aid in this, I am donating several million credits worth of equipment to the clans of Vorpa'eli, for use in their terraforming project." Esera held out her open hands. "What I want is not incompatible with what you want. Ahsoka Tano agrees with me. I hope you will trust in her..." Esera nearly said *wisdom,* "decision."

"What I want is for Mandalore to be free of all foreign influence," Kryze said. "When I have restored order to the planet and evicted the Loyalist miners, you will take your Separatists and leave, little girl. You are not welcome here, nor are you wanted. I will not be a Separatist pawn."

Esera crossed her arms. If Kryze wanted to play rough, she'd play rough too. "That's funny, I seem to remember you having no problem taking orders from Count Dooku when you were in Death Watch." Some of the chieftains gave Kryze pointed looks, and the woman at least had the decency to flush.

"That was another time."

Murshida took a step forward, and bent over to put his mouthpiece by Esera's ear. "It is unwise to antagonize her, Captain," he whispered, as best a huge Skakoan cyber-guard could.

Esera waved him off, but she knew he was right. "Do we have an agreement, then?"

"Until I get a single hint you're up to your usual Separatist tricks, we do." Kryze could have spat those words, by how disdainfully she said them.

Clearly, Ahsoka Tano had heard Murshda too, because she was the one who took initiative after that. "There are off-world clans here, too. Where would they come into this?"

"Yes, I'm quite aware of the Tenaus," said Kryze.

"They are certainly off-worlders," grumbled one of the elders.

"We're not the only ones!" Rahab of Tenau spoke up. "This planet is as much our heritage as any of yours! If you only unite the Mandalorians who never left, Kryze, then the other clans who have yet to return will challenge you."

"Let them-" Kryze suddenly paused, and she closed her mouth. Something seemed to occur to her, Esera thought, but it was not an epiphany she shared. "No, actually. I have another idea. This is how it will play out. I want all clans to send their representatives here, to Sundari. Even you Tenaus."

Rahab's back straightened. Usurper she may have been, this was the first recognition the Tenaus had gotten from one of the planet-dwelling Mandalorians. "And then what?" she asked.

"With the clans of Vorpa'eli, I can dismiss the clone legion. Mandalorians alone would protect Mandalore. That will put an end to the rumors I am a foreign puppet. Satine's mistakes let the Death Watch take over, and they brought the Republic here. I will set it all right, using our own blood. You, Clan Tenau, will be the first off-worlders to declare for me."

A choking noise escaped Baruch's lips, but Rahab nodded. "And if the Tenaus support you, others will listen, pledging to you," she said. "And the usurper becomes legitimate."

Darkness passed over Kryze's face at that word. "If that's how you see it," she said. "Send out word. Bo-Katan Kryze calls all clans home. The time has come for our final liberation."

"Agreed," Kentaroh said.

"Agreed," Rahab said.

The meeting ended there.

In a day she managed to turn this from an existential threat to her rule into a plan for her coronation, Esera thought. As much as she disliked Kryze, she was impressed. The woman had a shrewd and cunning mind, if anything.

"You think this can work?" asked Esera, looking at Tano.

The Togruta shrugged. "If anyone can do it, it's her."

"I hope so. I like leaving places better than I found them."

Ahsoka Tano didn't answer with words, she just nodded, a distant look in her eyes. The room buzzed with energy, the chieftains talking among each other. Something tremendous had been set in motion, in this dusty little village, today.

Then a bell began to clang, and the cry of "*Fire!"* went up outside.

It was not without irony that Sanya noted her first sight of Mandalorians fighting was... firefighting. Jetpacked warriors flew hoses from local wells, others took their vibroweapons to the underbrush and began clearing. Some even used a mining laser rig to burn a cordon into the ground, in the hopes the flames wouldn't cross a meter of ground already turned to cinders. These were all techniques she'd used on Agamar, fighting far larger fires.

Vorpa'eli was a continent only three human generations into its restoration, it had scant few forests, which were all far away from the Dusala village. Much of the restored region's border was covered in delicate scrub, spindly bushes clinging to a layer of living soil only a few inches deep. Over the years, decomposing plant matter would build that soil up further, until it became rich enough to grow larger plants in. Only after a few decades were they able to begin open-air farming, a pursuit they deemed more noble than the hydroponics gardens in their plastic greenhouses.

Kentaroh looked toward the horizon through macrobinoculars. "It's all in the scrub," he said. "Likely the work of the faithless."

"The New Mandalorians?" Sanya asked. "Why would they do this?"

"The restoration of the planet offends them," said the chieftain. "This fire isn't old, they must still be nearby."

Whirlwind was volunteered into the search party of speeder bikes and both groundspeeders and airspeeders, Esera wasn't letting a chance for more repute with the tribes slip by. She sat at the controls, letting the ship fly herself, as she focused on the scanners. "Found them," she said. "There's a groundspeeder headed into the wastelands, two hundred kilometers an hour." She smiled. "Driving it like they stole it."

"I doubt they stole it, Captain," Purity said. "It would be difficult to steal from Mandalorians."

"It's just something my master used to say," Esera told her, smile vanishing.

A groundspeeder could go fast, and Sanya understood they could be harder to track on scanners due to ground clutter. But *Whirlwind* was no ordinary ship, and she was far faster. They were on the culprits within minutes. A blast with the laser cannons in front of them made them swerve, and go spinning across the flat, glassy waste. "Set us down," Esera said to no one, leaving the controls. *Whirlwind* flew on, maneuvering down to the spun-out groundspeeder. Sanya looked at the control stick moving on its own, and felt tingles down her spine. The Force was far more powerful in this ship than it should have been. She followed Esera and Purity down to the lower deck, where the landing ramp was already extended. Kentaroh and his warriors had blasted out with their jetpacks, and were already surrounding the speeder.

Esera strolled down the ramp, Murshida, Purity, and the magnaguards behind her, Sanya following after them. Chunks of decaying glass crunched beneath their boots, just another quite literal step on its evolution into sand. "Well, who are they?" Esera asked Kentaroh.

"Faithless," spat the chieftain. The two men they'd pulled from the smoking speeder were much like their captors. Tall, pale-skinned, pale-haired, pale-eyed. They were older than the warriors, but not so old as Kentaroh.

"Go ahead, kill us," one of the men said. "We've fulfilled our mission. Death is nothing to us now."

"You have no right to speak like warriors," Kentaroh said. "You are traitors to our race."

"What is your race?" asked the second man. "A band of thugs and criminals, competing to be the most brutish monster? You and I are the same in blood only. I am disgusted to share this world with you."

These are Satine's New Mandalorians? Sanya asked herself. This wasn't what she expected. They were pacifists, weren't they?

Kentaroh pulled out his vibroknife, and yanked the first man's head back. "Your blood will wet these wastes, faithless. The first step to reclaiming this land. I hope you appreciate the irony."

"To your health, Mandalorian. I hope you see it all burn," said the first of the New Mandalorians.

"Live shamed and die empty," said the second.

Kentaroh flicked his wrist, opening the throat of the first. Blood spurt out over the glassy ground, deep red against the white. One of the other warriors did the same to the second. The bodies flopped to the ground, gurgling as the pool of blood spread around them. "Leave them. I won't have our earth contaminated by their tainted blood." Kentaroh and the warriors headed back to *Whirlwind.*

The smell of iron filled Sanya's nose, the shockwave of two deaths so near rocked the Force in her very soul. Sanya's hands shook, her stomach turned, her head spun. She'd seen countless dead bodies on Agamar, but she'd rarely been near the killing. Never had she felt two men die in front of her. And the blood... blaster wounds never did anything like that. *So much blood...* Sanya swayed, and Murshida caught her.

"Easy, Miss Sanya," he said quietly. "I feel it too."

Purity turned from the dead men to Sanya and Murshida. "I don't feel anything," the bio-droid said. "Should I?"

"I don't believe so, Miss Alpha," said Murshida. "You cannot feel the Force like we can. It is not in your nature. Do not be worried."

It was Esera who Sanya watched, though. The young woman stared back, blue eyes piercing through her, stripping away her body and peering into her cosmic essence that made Sanya more than a lump of meat and neurons. For an instant, their minds touched. It was not an intrusion, Esera did not push. She simply touched, and as quickly as it had happened, Esera was gone again.

"You really still feel it," she said, speaking to her for the first time since the incident all those months ago.

"Yes?" Sanya didn't know what else to say, between the shock of death and the shock of what Esera had done. *Why did she do that? Did she not believe me? Is she done ignoring me?*

"I didn't feel anything at all," said Esera. "Should *I* be worried, Mister Murshida? I stood here and let Kentaroh kill those two. I didn't even think to stop him."

"I think this is something we should talk about in a less upsetting environment," Murshida said, his hands on Sanya's shoulders, grip firm enough to comfort but soft enough not to hurt.

"Yes, perhaps so. Come along, Purity." Esera led them back to the ship. Purity looked back at the dead New Mandalorians, fascinated by the scarlet stain sinking into the white glassy sand.

"This Mandalorian plot is going... somewhere, General," Clothar Aclinde said. He looked bemused by the datapad in his hands.

"Not what you expected?" Grievous asked him.

"I would have thought Bo-Katan Kryze to be like her sister, unbending and brittle. She is showing surprising flexibility." The spymaster licked his lips, and scrolled through Komara's report again. "An odd choice to host this Mandalorian council in the tunnels beneath Sundari, though. Most odd."

"The gods have favored Ahsoka Tano before. And the gods favor Esera Komara. When they are together, even Mandalorians might be swayed."

"Gods, sir?" Aclinde gave him a look, as if he'd said complete gibberish. Sometimes, Grievous too felt that way by the things that came out of his vocoder. More and more, the distinction between Grievous before the shuttle crash and after was fading away. When his underlings started giving him *those* looks, Grievous had two options: smack them, or ignore them. Aclinde could not have his head put back on, unlike a battle droid, so he ignored the man's question.

"If Komara gets the Republic off of Mandalore, we win. If Komara creates a strong, neutral Mandalore, we win even more. Those civilians tell me I cannot summon money out of thin air. Apparently we need trade. A strong neutral state would provide a market we sorely lack." This time, Aclinde understood, and nodded. But Grievous still couldn't believe he was speaking so... much like Nute Gunray, actually. *Markets! Trade! Neutrality! What is happening to me? And this Human thought I was speaking nonsense about gods.*

"Captain Komara is proving quite successful in her work," said Aclinde.

"She is my most useful asset," Grievous told him. "I trust her judgments."

"Yes, yes, useful indeed," Aclinde said, his voice almost a mutter. He poured over her report again, brows drawn down. "How does she do it?" he whispered to himself. Even a veteran like him could be impressed by the girl's work, it seemed. Grievous felt an inkling of pride. He'd never tell Komara that though, she was petulant enough already.

Night had long since fallen on the hemisphere of Coruscant where *500 Republica* stood, but that didn't mean time stopped. In the Chancellor's suite, Tarkin sat with untouched tea gone cold. He glared at the woman in the hologram.

"General Potkin, your instructions were explicit. Find a reason to increase our control of Mandalore, and more importantly, kill the Komara girl." Tarkin tapped his fingers together. "Kryze's meeting with the Separatist-aligned tribes, and Komara isn't dead. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"My lord, I have been waiting for the right opportunity. Making a move against Kryze now would only increase her support," said Shadday Potkin's hologram. "A controlled strike at the perfect moment would topple Kryze and take out Komara. It will be easy, it will be quick, and it will be clean."

"And when is this moment coming, pray tell?" asked Tarkin.

"There's going to be a meeting in Sundari. All the clans will be there. I don't know where, yet, but I am confident I am more than a match for Ventress and Tano should they interfere-"

Tarkin held up a finger, and looked at the screen to the side of the hologram. "Leave that to our intelligence forces, General. When they discover this meeting place, you will kill them all."

"My lord, I'm a soldier, not an assassin. There is no honor in striking from the shadows."

"Then challenge Komara on your own, if you must. The rest of them must die by any means necessary. You have that *Tector* in orbit. Use it."

The former Jedi stood there, mouth open. She recovered a moment later. "My lord, destroying Sundari-"

Tarkin sighed. "The Separatist ship, you fool. Destroy their ship and bait Komara out. Get rid of her, and then go after these Mandalorians."

"Ah, I see. It is as good as done, my lord." Potkin bowed, and the transmission went off.

Buffoon, thought Tarkin. *Arrogant buffoon.* He looked back to the screen, where Carammite code flashed, waiting to be run through the decryption program. Courtesy of a package left under a certain bench, retrieved by an unsuspecting, unquestioning clone. *But buffoon or not, I'll get you everything you need to know, Potkin.*

Author's note and long list of responses: Two and a half months to write this chapter, two and a half rewrites to get it right (all of the sixth season of the Expanse aired in that time, oof. I included a brief tip of my metaphorical fedora to it in this chapter). That's what I've been doing since the end of October, for anyone not following the updates on my profile page. There was an entire 5000 word battle sequence I wrote for this and scrapped entirely when I realized it screwed up the whole arc. And you guys know how long it takes me to write set-piece battles. But I made the right call in the end, I am much happier with how this chapter went in this version 2.5, even if far less action goes down. I can hear the actionbois in the comments groaning. Nothin personell, kids, it's just good character development. For anyone confused by the final scene, refer to the final scene of chapter 28. I'm convinced ASD would read better if it were released all at once instead of one chapter a month.

Now let me respond to Valued and Unvalued Reviewers!

To the Esteemed Anonymous Guest, who asked when chapter 48 would be up: it's up now, but I had no way to tell you it was a matter of days away. Please make an account so I can communicate more effectively, or look at my profile page for updates on the latest chapter.

To Valued Reviewer Jackswurmple: do not worry any longer. I AM fixing Star Wars. This Mandalorian arc is about reconciling what Filoni and Lucas showed us in the show with what prior authors had built up the Mandalorians to be. There are indeed talented people who contributed to the EU, I just think there's many more hacks who also contributed... poorly. I read the novel "Dark Rendezvous" in November and was surprised by how good it was, even if the Canadian author couldn't bear to utter the word "Separatist" for fear of the chad Quebecer. Poor little leaf. But it was good, and I believe Fellow Author ZakoBattledroid when he says there are more good Star Wars books out there. I hope this soothes your fears.

To Unvalued Reviewer Perrou: I denounce you. I name you a jester, I name you a clown, I name you a troll. I welcome all to bring forward critiques and concerns, I will hold dialogue with all who speak in good faith, no matter their opinions or critiques. I asked for clarifications on what you didn't like because I want to improve the early chapters, you chose not to answer me, and this denunciation will stand. You'll never read this so I doubt you ever will answer.

To the Pugnacious FFS Man, as I cannot reply to him privately: I will resurrect whoever I please. Luckily for you, I have done all the resurrecting I intend to do. Zule Xiss has been a small but important addition to the story and she will continue to play a small but important role. I sympathize with your frustration of people running into the same set of people over and over again. In some cases, this is deliberate for thematic reasons (such as Esera and Ahsoka's recurring meetings, and Obi-wan and Grievous's frequent encounters). In this arc I sent in the movie extra-tier character Shadday Potkin instead of Ardabur Aspar to provide a Republic Jedi antagonist we haven't seen before. If you think this is getting boring, please bear with me for another few chapters. If you've been paying attention you can see what's coming.

To Valued Reviewer Ander Arias: I have feared that the Esera et al parts have been too slow to be interesting. Things will be moving more quickly with them now. I had the misfortune of having read Robert Jordan's meandering and snail-in-molasses-paced fantasy series (or the first eleven books of it that were then published) in my most formative years, I have never been able to shake the tendency towards snail-in-molasses pacing out of my writing style.

To Valued Reviewer Miss Sleepy Clover: your comments always make me smile, I'm glad you're still with us after all this time.

And finally, shout-out to my beta reader Corshy1, and a hearty shout-out to Fellow Author ZakoBattledroid, who came up with most of the plan for the reconciling of Filoni's Mandalorians and EU Mandalorians that this arc will cover. You can also thank him for pushing me to add characters like Shau Meo and Same Sellero (and we'll be seeing a lot more of her soon), among others.

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